

Chapter IV

Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in the Northeast: Need for Radical Civil Forums

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Introduction

THE MOVEMENTS AND conflicts revolving around the issues of ethnicity and identity are not new phenomena. Several multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies in the world have experienced ethnic assertions of different varieties and magnitudes. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of socialist regimes in the East Europe, the world has witnessed further intensification of ethnic conflicts. These ethnic uprisings have threatened the political integrity of many a multinational state and led to the birth of new sovereign states. Some of the ethnic conflicts in the world led to genocide, ethnic cleansing and displacement of millions of innocent people. The countries that experienced ethnic revolts made attempts to control them through repressive measures or through accommodative policies. But far from showing any signs of abatement, the intensity and magnitude of ethnic conflicts appear to be rising day by day. Realizing the depth of the problem and the need for finding answers to it, scholars and peace activists the world over have made attempts to comprehend the nature and dynamics of the ethnic phenomena. Based on the insights that some of them have thrown open, the present paper endeavours to grasp the specificity of ethnic conflicts in northeast India and seeks to explore the ways and means to mitigate the ethnic tensions threatening peace and development of the region.

Classification of Ethnic Movements in Northeast India

The northeast India has experienced various types of ethnic movements involving conflicts of diverse kinds. Based on the nature of the conflicts, these movements can be broadly classified into five ideal type categories. The first category involves the ethnic movements of indigenous communities for secession. These movements directly confront the Indian nation state. In these movements, by making use of historical, cultural and racial differences, the ethnic communities claim themselves as distinct nations that had nothing to do with India or Indians till they were forcibly merged with British India. The ethnic communities resist their forced integration with the Indian Union and refuse to be assimilated into the Indian national mainstream. They characterize the Indian State as a colonizer and project themselves as victims of colonial oppression and exploitation. They foresee hope for their people only after liberating from Indian colonization through armed revolt. The Nagas' movement for independent Nagalim and also the ULFA's and the Meitei militant groups' movements for sovereign Assam and Manipur respectively can be placed under this category.¹ The second ideal type category includes different ethnic movements for statehood and regional autonomy within the Indian Union. Although some of them may use the language of secessionists, their objective is not to establish sovereign states. Their protests are primarily directed against the big brotherly attitude of the regional elites. They complain of political discrimination and economic neglect of their communities by the dominant nationalities/ethnic groups within the region. They contend that their communities cannot develop unless they have their separate states within the Indian Union or autonomous regions within the existing Indian states. To achieve their objectives, the ethnic groups adopt both constitutional and extra-constitutional strategies. The movements of the Khasis, Garos, Mizos, Bodos, Karbis for separate statehoods or autonomous states/regions within the Indian Union belong to this category.² The third ideal type category consists of ethnic movements that are concerned with the issues of culture and language. They may or may not have territorial ambitions. Their struggles are primarily aimed against attempts at assimilation through the imposition of language and the culture of the dominant nationalities. They basically seek recognition and protection of their linguistic and cultural identities. Different movements such as the Assamese opposition to the imposition of Bengali as official language in Assam during the colonial period, the agitation led by the Bengalis in the Barak Valley region of Assam against language and education policies of the Assam government after independence, the Meiteis' movement for restoration of their traditional religious identities and the movements for

recognition of Manipuri and Bodo languages as national languages belong to this category.³ The fourth category comprises of movements directed against the communities usually referred to as outsiders. The outsiders could be anyone – the refugees and illegal immigrants from the neighbouring countries and also the migrants from other parts of India. The ethnic communities that claim themselves to be indigenous, view all outsiders as exploiters and competitors, and hence enemies, the root cause of all their problems and sufferings. The ethnic movements directed against such outsiders make demands for their deportation or for denial of citizenship rights to those foreign nationals. They also insist on restriction and abrogation of the rights of other Indian nationals from settling in the region and seeking jobs and practising trades and professions in the land that the indigenous communities claim to be their own. The ethnic movements of this type make case for preferential treatment for the indigenous people in matters relating to employment, property and political power. Various movements like the Assam agitation against the Bangladeshis, the Arunachalees opposition to granting the rights of citizenship to the Chakmas, the Khasis' assaults on the Bengalis and the Nepalese, the Bodos' attacks on the Adivasis and the Bengali Muslims, the movements demanding reservation of all government jobs in the region to the indigenous people and restoration of the land alienated from the tribal people, etc., belong to this category.⁴ The last ideal type category includes the movements or struggles directed against other indigenous ethnic groups within the region. Here the 'historical rights' argument' is carried on to a level where the indigenous peoples themselves become insiders as well as outsiders depending on where in the northeast they have settled. The movements aim at restoring/altering the status of indigenous groups or the balance of powers within the region. Their discords may be recent phenomena or they have roots dating back to centuries. The conflicts of this type may be aiming for securing certain material benefits or for assertion of their ethnic pride. In such conflicts the dominant ethnic groups expect the minority ethnic groups to accept their supremacy in the region in view of the 'fact' that the given territory originally belongs to them and that they constitute the majority in the region. The ethnic movements with such objectives or ideology may resort to peaceful and legally acceptable forms of protests and they can also take to genocide and ethnic cleansing. The Khasis demand for altering the recruitment and land acquisition policies of the Meghalaya government, the Karbi-Kuki and the Dimasahmar clashes in Assam and the Naga-Kuki and Kuki-Paite conflicts in Manipur fit in this category.⁵

All the five categories described above are only ideal types and therefore we may not be able to find ethnic movements corresponding

wholly to any of these pure forms in concrete situations. The actual ethnic movements or struggles that we come across in the northeast normally have the characteristics of two or more of these ideal type categories. For example, the Assam agitation was a movement directed against the foreign nationals and at the same time had as its objective the protection of the Assamese language and culture. The Bodos were fighting against the big brotherly attitude of the Assamese elite and at the same time carrying ahead assaults against the Santalis and the non-tribals for gaining supremacy over other inhabitants in the region that they claim to be their homeland. Despite such complexities the ideal type categories described above still help us to identify the dominant features of the given ethnic movement/conflict and also enables us to differentiate it from other types of ethnic movements and conflicts.

Roots of Ethnic Conflicts

As in the case of Africa, in northeast India also several scholars see ethnic communities as something synonymous with tribes.⁶ Naturally, to them, the ethnic conflicts appear either as the outcome of primordial loyalties and ancient hatreds or as the assertions of tribal communities for protecting their culture, traditions and communal ownership of the means of production against the marauding influences of the non-tribal communities. However, the fact of the matter is that most communities officially referred to as scheduled tribes have long back moved away from the tribal stage of development. Today there are hardly any isolated primitive communities in the northeast that can fit the definition of tribe. Many of the indigenous communities were exposed to the process of modernity right from the British days. After the region was politically and economically integrated with India, the traditional socio-economic structures and institutions of all the indigenous communities started getting influenced by modern constitutional institutions and practices.⁷ With the advent of private property, the class differentiation began to take place among all these communities. Although the communally owned simple subsistence economy is now on the verge of extinction, the persistence of old traditions and cultural practices help the communities to keep the semblance of tribe alive. The recognition of the changes that have taken place among these communities drives one to examine the concrete factors that generate ethnic conflicts in the northeast India, thereby helping in overcoming the limitations of the reductionist interpretations.

Role of Colonialism

Many scholars working on ethnicity have recognized the role of colonialism in constructing ethnic identities and in reinforcing ethnic divisions among the indigenous communities in different parts of the globe. For their exploitation the colonial powers artificially divided the continent into numerous states without taking into consideration the history and the ethnic composition of the people. Through military bureaucratic measures, the colonial states sought to bring the warring communities under one political rule. In some countries the colonial powers patronized certain communities and used them against other communities inhabiting the state. In certain countries they brought bonded workers from other countries and employed them in their industries and plantations. Such measures perpetuated the ethnic divisions and stood as obstacles in the path of the nationalist forces trying to unite all the ethnic communities against colonialism. After the colonial powers withdrew, the ethnic tensions mounted in many post-colonial countries and led to the redrawing of the political map of some of those countries.⁸

Although not in the same way, the British, which occupied and then integrated the northeastern region as part of British India, also laid the material base for ethnic tensions in the post-colonial India.⁹ By merging the Bengali dominant districts of Bengal Presidency with the Assam province, by forcibly bringing the Santalis from central India to work in the tea plantations and by consciously encouraging the migration of lakhs of Bengali Muslim peasants into the plains of Brahmaputra valley, the British rule sowed the seeds of ethnic tensions in the plains of Assam. In the hill areas of the northeast, the British followed a diametrically opposite policy and deliberately kept the people living in the hills away from the people of the rest of India. By demarcating specific zones for the settlement of the major tribal groups inhabiting the hills, by codifying the traditions and culture of each of the tribes, by exposing the hill people to Christianity and to modern education, by attributing to them specific identities as Nagas, Mizos and Kukis, the British rule made the hill people feel that they are racially and culturally different from the Indians and instilled apprehensions in their minds about all the people living in the plains. The ethnic identities so generated among the hill people during the colonial rule stood as impediments to their voluntary integration with the Indian mainstream. The creation of a separate colonial state of Burma and later the partition of British India into India and Pakistan also contributed in their own ways to the rise of ethnic tensions in northeast India.

Demographic Changes

Several scholars have tried to explain ethnic conflicts by relating them to the dramatic changes in demographic composition of the region. In the northeast India also, the demographic changes have generated tensions between the so called indigenous communities which have settled in the region before colonial rule and the communities which migrated into the region during the colonial rule or after India's independence. The ethnic tensions in Assam between the Bengalis and the Assamese people, following the immigration and settlement of lakhs of Bengalis/Bangladeshis before and after 1947, is a well-recorded fact.¹⁰ Similarly, the ethnic tensions between the so called tribal and non-tribal population in Tripura is attributed to the immigration of lakhs of Bengalis from East Pakistan, later Bangladesh, into Tripura, which made the indigenous communities feel that they have become minority in their own land. Likewise the accommodation of Chakma refugees increased tensions in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Although in the hill states of northeast, the indigenous people constitute majority, they still worry about the possible influx of outsiders into their states and their fears – real or imaginary – at times drive them to violent attacks against the communities considered by them as outsiders.¹¹

Material Factors

The structural conflict theorists locate the primary source of ethnic conflicts in social, economic and political organization of the society. They see economic and political discrimination to be the prime causes of ethnic conflicts.¹² Economic issues like underdevelopment, deteriorating economic conditions, over population, land alienation, competition for scarce resources, growth of poverty, problem of unemployment, etc., are usually cited as the factors contributing to ethnic tensions. Other problems like denial of opportunity for state building, policy of assimilation, administrative and political discrimination, violation of human rights, etc. also generate ethnic feelings among the marginalized communities against their oppressors. In northeast India some of the ethnic militant groups justify their struggles by citing political and economic injustices done to their communities. ULFA, for example, defends its struggle for independent Assam by highlighting how the Indian State exploited the natural resources like oil and tea and deliberately kept the province of Assam underdeveloped for decades. The growth of Meitei militancy in Manipur is attributed to factors like forced

integration of Manipur, lack of development and growing unemployment of the educated youth.¹³

Psycho-Cultural Factors

Psycho-cultural theorists argue that historical, demographic and structural factors cannot explain why the conflicts should take ethnic forms. Recognition of the fact that the ethnic clashes are value related conflicts that do not necessarily revolve around material interests drive the scholars to emphasize the psycho-cultural factors that shape up the subjective dimensions involved in ethnic and identity oriented movements.¹⁴ The ethnic communities, which are basically cultural groups united by feelings of belonging to common descent, religion, language or race, believe in cultural exclusiveness of their groups from others. More often than not the way the communities define themselves and others are influenced by subjective considerations and have little to do with objective reality. While making efforts to distinguish between "us" and "them", the ethnic communities construct mythico-histories that glorify their own virtues and exaggerate others' follies. If the communities happen to be indigenous ethnic groups, they tend to make ethnically defined historical rights' claims over others and argue that since they were the first to settle in the land and establish the state in the region, their supremacy over the land and the resources should be acknowledged by all others who migrated to the region afterwards. Their philistinism, sense of relative deprivation and xenophobia structure the way the ethnic communities react to real or imaginary threats emanating from others. The ethnic experience in the northeast lends justification to some of the assumptions of psycho-cultural theories. The Nagas, for example, justified their movement for independent Nagalim on the ground that as a community they are different from rest of the Indians – racially, linguistically and culturally. The problems of under-development, unemployment, poverty, etc. do not seem to be prime determinants of their struggle.¹⁵ Of course, even in those ethnic movements where the structural problems really mattered, one can see the communities projecting the socio-cultural issues as their main concerns. The fear that they become minority in their own land and that their language, culture and identity would be lost has the potentiality to drive the indigenous ethnic groups to violent and irrational means to protect what they consider to be their community interests.

Instrumental Factors

As against the theories which view ethnic conflicts as the natural outcome of historical, structural and psycho-cultural factors, there are a few which project politics revolving round ethnicity and identity as conscious attempts made by particular parties, groups or classes in the society to achieve certain goals. They see ethnic politics as instruments used or manipulated for realizing the specific objectives. The schools may differ in their interpretations of the goals and objectives of ethnic politics and may not agree on the question of who actually manipulate or benefit out of such politics, but they are clear on the point that ethnic conflicts are not mere manifestations of primordial loyalties or ancient hatreds. The ethnic conflicts have their base in contemporary problems and they are consciously given shape with particular motives. The Rational Choice theorists see ethnic groups like any other interest groups pursuing their goals by making choices beneficial to them.¹⁶ According to Donald Horowitz's ethnic conflict theory control of the state, control of a state and exemption from control by others are among the main goals of ethnic conflict. Groups seek control of the state in order to ensure that their needs are met, usually to the detriment of opposing groups.¹⁷ The instrumentalists look at ethnic group as a focus of political mobilization by the political leaders to voice the interests of the community. According to them, the ethnic politics/conflicts take place in a political space, which has certain prerequisites essential for ethnic mobilization like political leadership, organizational structures, communication networks, manpower, funds, ideology, external encouragement, etc.

The Marxists often interpret ethnic conflicts as political designs of the ruling classes to serve their interests by dividing the unity of the working masses.¹⁸ All these instrumental theories have some relevance to the northeast as well. Quite a few studies on the northeast have taken note of the emergence of the middle classes and their roles in leading or misleading different ethnic movements. They have also pointed out how various issues raised by different ethnic movements are in conformity with the interests of the dominant classes. According to some Marxists, the Assam agitation was a deliberate ploy hatched by the upcoming Assamese bourgeoisie who saw the rise of the left forces in 1978 elections as a threat to their interests.¹⁹ It was pointed out that without the financial and media support from the regional elite or the national bourgeoisie, the agitation could not have lasted for long on its own strength. Even among the hill communities the newly emerging political elite and the propertied classes do effectively capitalize on increasing differences between the people's expectations and the actual reality by propagating linear/binary view of the problems at hand. They used ethnic

sentiments of the people for promoting private interests. It is pointed out that the ethnic attacks against the Bengalis and the Nepalese in the eighties and early nineties were consciously planned by the newly emerging Khasi elite with a view to gain control over the prime land and business in Shillong City. While recognizing the roles played by the ruling classes and the regional elites in promoting ethnic politics in the region, it needs to be said however that once ethnic politics and ideology gain mass character, the ethnic momentum gains some autonomy from the parties and the classes that promoted them and it can then even work against them.

As such we have many theories and interpretations of ethnic conflicts, each one emphasizing on one or a set of factors. While acknowledging the relevance of their insights, one should also recognize that the social reality in the northeast India is so complex that no single theory of conflicts can be excessively relied upon. As we come across different kinds of ethnic conflicts in the northeast, each one with its own history and dynamics, it will be difficult to give a general explanation to all types of conflicts. As the factors that generate ethnic conflicts differ from one case to the other, no single factor or set of factors can be given primacy over the others. The efforts aimed at resolving the conflicts should therefore aim to comprehend the specificity of each of the conflicts and then explore whether they have anything in common with other ethnic conflicts in the region. Before one attempts to suggest appropriate measures for dealing with the ethnic conflicts, it may be useful to examine how the Indian State responded to the challenges posed by politics and conflicts that revolved round the issues of ethnicity and identity in India's northeast.

Strategies for of Ethnic Conflict Resolution

In addition to repressive measures, several other alternative approaches and strategies are suggested for dealing with threats emanating from ethnic conflicts. Many argued for appropriate reforms in constitutional, political and legal institutions and practices to accommodate the aspirations of the ethnic communities. Cooperative federalism, decentralization, regional autonomy and consociational practices are advocated as viable solutions for accommodating the aspirations of ethnic communities.²⁰ The citizenship rights, balanced economic development, electoral reforms and observance of human rights are also considered as prerequisites for ensuring peace across ethnic groups. The Human Needs theory emphasizes on the obligation of satisfying primordial and universal needs of security, identity, recognition and development for the establishment of stable politics. According to John

Burton unless identity needs are met in multi-ethnic societies, unless in every social system there is distributive justice, a sense of control, and prospects for the pursuit of all other human societal developmental needs, instability and conflict are inevitable.²¹ Several scholars also stressed the importance of preventive diplomacy in averting ethnic conflicts. However, in the extreme cases where the contradictions between the parties in conflict become irreconcilable, separation is seen as the only alternative left for ensuring peace.²² Since most states might not have the resources or commitment to initiate appropriate reforms or steps for accommodation of ethnic communities, several scholars and the peace activists felt it desirable to involve non-state actors in the peace process. The potentialities of mediation by the UN or other regional level organizations in dealing with the parties in conflict have been examined. The involvement of NGOs and humanitarian organizations is also advocated and tried in certain countries that experienced ethnic conflicts. The role and strategies of the mediators/ negotiators in ethnic conflict resolution has been the subject matter of several works on the peace process.²³ Similarly, the potentialities of the diaspora in mitigating the ethnic tensions are also debated. The ethnic groups that may be a majority and considered as indigenous in one region do remain as minorities and outsiders in other places. This realization can make the ethnic diaspora play a positive role in making sense to their community people to respect and protect the ethnic minorities living in the region where they constitute majority.

Indian State's Response to Ethnic Conflicts

The Indian State has been confronting the ethnic challenges of one or the other sorts from the day it emerged as a sovereign state. The state elite in India who attained political power after independence had some understanding of the problems of ethnicity and identity. They consciously gave shape to a federal set up and granted autonomy for the national and ethnic communities. Unlike the blacks in America and the aboriginal peoples in Australia who were denied citizenship rights for long, the Indian Constitution formally granted citizenship rights to all, including the people of the northeast. The indigenous people of the northeast benefited considerably from the policy of reservations guaranteed by the Constitution of India to the scheduled tribes and the scheduled castes in education, government jobs and also in the assemblies and the parliament. The Sixth Schedule was incorporated as a part of the Constitution of India to guarantee autonomy and self-government to the hill communities in the northeast to protect and

preserve their culture, traditions, institutions and resources.²⁴ Although not declared officially, consociational practices followed by the Indian State to accommodate different ethnic and national groups, did allow ethnic elite to become ministers and decision-makers at different levels of government. When the Nagas refused to be a part of the Indian Union, the Indian State attempted to appease them by granting separate statehood in the early sixties, much before the erstwhile princely states of Tripura and Manipur were granted the statehood.

The Indian State positively responded to the aspirations of other hill peoples of the erstwhile composite state of Assam such as the Mizos, Khasis and Garos by creating the new states of Mizoram and Meghalaya.²⁵ Having reorganized the region into seven states (eight including Sikkim), the Government of India is now not keen on further fragmenting the region at the moment, although it is not averse to accommodating on selective bases the demands for more autonomy. Very recently the Indian State agreed to extend the provisions of the Sixth Schedule to the Bodos living in the plains of Assam. Several accords have been concluded with different ethnic groups in the northeast with the intention to put an end to ethnic conflicts in the region.²⁶ After concluding the Mizo Accord and the Assam Accord, the ethnic political organizations which led the movements were allowed to form governments at the state levels. Apart from continuing the peace talks with the militant representatives of well-organized ethnic groups like the Nagas, the Central government has also invited other ethnic militant groups like DHD, UPDS, NLFT, etc. for talks. For long the Indian State showed its willingness to talk to only those ethnic militant groups that accepted the sovereignty of India and were willing to abide by the provisions of the Indian Constitution. It ruled out any talks with the organizations making demands for secession and used all its might to crush the militant ethnic movements fighting for full independence. The Indian State stationed several battalions of military and paramilitary forces in the northeast and gave them unlimited legal powers to suppress different ethnic insurgent movements. Sometimes, the official perception that all those supporting or sympathizing with the secessionists are anti-nationals drives the Indian security agencies to treat those indigenous ethnic people as their enemies and violate their basic human rights.²⁷ Although there have been pressures on the Indian State – from both the ethnic militant groups and the western powers for the involvement of the external mediators to settle the intricate ethnic conflicts, the Indian State has not conceded all these years to the demands for separation or for the involvement of the UN or a foreign country as mediators between the Indian State and the ethnic militant groups. However, for the first time the Indian State accepted to hold talks with Naga ethnic militant group.

NSCN(IM) in a third country. The services of Mr. Zoramthanga, the present Chief Minister of Mizoram, once a militant leader, were used to negotiate with the Naga militants. The government did not obstruct the Naga Hoho's and Naga Mothers' Association's peace initiatives in Nagaland. Similarly the Church was asked to mediate between the government and the militants in Meghalaya.

Being aware of the fact that repression alone cannot put an end to ethnic conflicts in the region, the Indian State has taken other kinds of initiatives to deal with the ethnic tensions. The Government of India has initiated various policies and programmes for the economic development of the region. After the Assam Accord, the central government has been taking steps to fence the international borders to stop infiltration and started issuing multipurpose identity cards in the districts bordering Bangladesh. The state governments have enacted various acts for preventing the land alienation by the indigenous communities. Majority of the jobs in the state government sectors have been reserved for the indigenous people. A separate ministry (DONER) was constituted at the centre and thousands of crores of rupees have been pumped into the region to initiate developmental activities. Efforts have also been made to improve the transport and communication networks and to spread liberal education through schools, colleges and universities. Some of these measures did help in creating a sense of security among the indigenous people and made them accept the changes taking place in the region. The fifty-five years of the Indian rule could stem to a large extent the anti-Indian sentiments that were once dominant among the indigenous ethnic groups. Even though certain secessionist ethnic militant groups are still active in the region, none appears to be strong enough to pose a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation.

Limits of the Indian State

The fact that ethnic militancy is not in a position to pose any threat to the unity and integrity of India does not in any way imply that the Indian State has become capable of warding off all the challenges of ethnic and identity assertions in the northeast. The experience of the northeast shows that pumping of thousands of crores of rupees has only benefited a small section of the elite in the region. If the intention of the Indian State is to ensure peace in the region, what it really needs to do is to find out what appropriate policies and measures are to be planned and implemented to ensure overall development of all states and all communities of people in the northeast. Given the bourgeois character of the Indian State, it is doubtful whether it can ever succeed in tackling the structural problems

of underdevelopment, poverty and unemployment in the northeast. Further, the working of adversarial form of democracy, where winning the elections and attaining political power are seen as ends in themselves, breeds ethnic based political parties, pressure groups and militant organizations which develop vested interests in perpetuating ethnic divisions among the people.

Over the years the northeast has given birth to numerous political parties and pressure groups that feed on ethnicity and identity politics. It is doubtful whether the Indian State has the necessary strength to explore solutions for resolving the ethnic conflicts bypassing these vested interests that the system itself has given birth to. At times to appease the indigenous ethnic groups, the Indian State does not hesitate to take certain measures that went against the interests of the communities considered as outsiders. But the Government of India finds itself in catch-22 situation when it has to deal with conflicts involving the indigenous ethnic groups, especially when they make conflicting 'historical claims' for control of power, territory and resources. Its hesitation to make any commitment to the NSCN(IM) on the issue of integration of all Naga inhabited areas of the northeast, following the stiff opposition to the idea of integration by the Meiteis in Manipur, points out the dilemmas that the Government of India has to face in ethnic conflicts involving indigenous groups. Again, it is true that granting autonomy or statehood can help in mitigating ethnic tensions, if the ethnic group agitating for it is in absolute majority in the region. But in the regions where several ethnic groups inhabit, yielding to the demands of a dominant ethnic group and granting autonomy or statehood to it would only create mistrust and heart burning among others and generate more tensions. The experience in other countries also indicate that in the absence of civic nationalism, the statehood or autonomous regions make the dominant ethnic groups feel that they are free to do anything they like in the region where they are in majority. The ethno-nationalist policies that such groups pursue in turn provoke the minority ethnic groups inhabiting the region to demand creation of separate homelands for themselves.²⁸ The never ending demands for homelands by different ethnic groups in the northeast region points out the limits of relying on regional autonomy as solution to problems of ethnicity and identity. Given these intricate problems associated with the ethnic conflict resolution, it becomes clear that the Indian State does not have all the necessary resources and capabilities to resolve the ethnic conflicts in the northeast. The limitations of the Indian State, therefore, should compel us to explore other available options or alternatives that complement the state efforts to resolve ethnic conflicts in the northeast.

Agenda for Radical Civil Forums

All these alternatives proposed and experimented in different parts of the globe do have some relevance for the northeast situation also. However, how effectively the non-state actors mentioned above could play their part in ethnic conflict resolution depends on the outlook and compulsions of the Indian State. Moreover, the intervention of the state and the non-state actors would be of little value, if we do not have a vibrant civil society that supports and sustains the peace efforts. Being value-oriented conflicts, it is not possible to resolve the ethnic conflicts in the absence of a civil society where the individuals are rational and are conscious of their rights and social responsibilities. Had there been a strong, self-conscious and critical civil society in the northeast much of the bloodshed, destruction, displacement and insecurity accompanying the ethnic conflicts could have been avoided. Unfortunately, owing to the domination of regional and ethnic forces, the civil society in the northeast has remained fragmented and weak. In the absence of a strong and healthy civil society that can take on the parochial politics and ideologies, there is a very little hope for peace taking its roots in the northeast. But in the given circumstances are there any social forces in the northeast that could take up the responsibility of strengthening a civil society that upholds rational and secular values and respects individual freedom and human rights? One definitely cannot expect the traditional social forces to build such a modern civil society. At one time in history, elsewhere in the world, the upcoming bourgeois class gave shape to such a civil society which boldly stood for citizens' rights and opposed authoritarianism, religious obscurantism and primordial loyalties. Possibilities of that kind are ruled out in the peripheral regions of underdeveloped capitalist countries like India where the bourgeoisie and the proto-bourgeoisie have historically lost their progressive character.

The northeast experiences show that the parties and the organizations belonging to the regional bourgeoisie and the middle classes actually supported ethnic and parochial movements and abetted many a conflict in the region. Although they may at times, in their own interests, take positions against ethnic and identity politics, they cannot be relied upon because of their compromising nature. In this situation, the responsibility of giving a shape to an autonomous, critical and humane civil society can be shouldered only by the marginalized sections within the ethnic communities who have little or no stakes in ethnic and identity politics. It is only by giving shape to radical civil forums representing the general interests of the working class and the other labouring masses belonging to all ethnic communities in the region that one can dream of building up a civil society that can think and act, rising

above ethnic ideologies and politics. The emergence of the institution of private property and the birth of classes within the traditional communities have, in fact, created room for the rise of such alternative radical civil forums in the region. The political, social and cultural organizations belonging to such radical civil forums should work at the grass root levels in close association with the enlightened intelligentsia who can appreciate both the significance and limitations of ethnicity and identity politics in the context of northeast.

It is expected that these radical civil forums should maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis the Indian State as well as the ethnic militant groups active in the region. They must oppose repression and violation of the human rights of the innocent people by the security agencies, since such acts only contribute to further alienation of the indigenous ethnic communities from the national mainstream. Through united mass movements, they have to bring pressure upon the Indian State to take up appropriate developmental policies and programmes that benefit the masses belonging to all communities and states in the region. They ought to compel the government, politicians and the bureaucrats to ensure good governance so that all sections of the people could enjoy the fruits of development. It is also desirable for the civil forums to insist on appropriate education policies that would enable the people of the region to appreciate their differences and at the same time realize the need for working together for finding solutions to the common problems. By means of popular pressure the Indian State has to be forced to address to the basic human needs of all the communities and start negotiations with the ethnic militant groups. The opportunist and divisive politics of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes should be firmly opposed. It also needs to be ensured that the peace talks involve all the representatives of the ethnic communities involved in conflicts. To ensure the success of peace efforts, it is also essential to see that the government does not discriminate between the groups representing the communities and recognize one single group as the sole voice of the community. Especially where more than one ethnic organization or militant group is active in the region, inviting one and leaving the others will have negative impact on the peace efforts. The forums have to fight for justice and demand appropriate compensation and proper rehabilitation for all those persons and families who have become victims of ethnic conflicts. While not hesitating to take a stand against the anti-people's policies of the Indian government and its security agencies, the radical civil forums may also lend assistance to the policy makers and the peace activists in resolving the ethnic conflicts, by sharing with them information about the values, feelings and mind sets of the people of the region, which are very crucial for dealing with ethnic related conflicts.

Unlike certain interest groups operating in the region which only criticize the Indian State for its omissions and commissions, but avoid pointing fingers at the excesses committed by the ethnic organizations and their militant outfits, the radical civil forums must take a critical stand against ethnic militancy. While sympathizing with them to the extent they are fighting against the forced assimilation and exploitation by the dominant communities, the radical civil forums have to come out openly against the ethnic organizations and militant groups when they, in the name of protecting their ethnic communities, involve in inhuman acts such as the killing of the innocents, destruction of private and public properties, ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of ethnic minorities. Apart from compelling them to respect human rights, the radical civil forums should make the ethnic organizations and militant groups conscious of their patriarchal and authoritarian tendencies. The negative features like absence of internal democracy, intolerance towards criticism, blind obedience to traditions and authority, etc. commonly associated with ethnic organizations and militant groups need to be exposed and publicly censured. The ethnic militant groups need to be constantly reminded that since they claim to be the representatives of the ethnic communities, it is their responsibility to avoid deciding for the people and learn to listen to what their people really want. In the greater interests of the people of the region, it is essential to make the ethnic organizations and militant outfits to give up fratricidal conflicts and work for peace and reconciliation. Efforts should be made to make them realize the unrealistic and undemocratic nature of some of their demands and convince them to accept pragmatic solutions that are possible and beneficial to all the communities involved in the conflicts. Alternative proposals and formulas that ensure win-win situations may be suggested for the serious consideration of the parties in conflict.

Apart from acting as the critics of or as the mediators between the state agencies and the ethnic militant organizations, the multi-ethnic radical civil forums should strengthen their social base among the working class, the peasants, the women and the minorities. They need to work at grass roots levels and understand the genuine grievances, fears and feelings of the people. Pains should be taken to educate and empower the marginalized sections within the ethnic communities so that they themselves become capable of comprehending and realizing their interests. The radical civil forums have to make efforts to bring about changes in the ways the communities look at themselves and the others. Appropriate measures may be initiated to make the ethnic communities overcome the psychological barriers of suspicion, fear of rejection and sense of relative deprivation. Effective means have to be used to make the people realize that the problems that they face are not peculiar to their

communities and that the ethnic movements do not have the capabilities to show solutions to their real problems. While remaining sensitive to the symbolic nature of their identity assertions, care has to be taken to eliminate mutual, dehumanized images. As it is better for the communities to accept the past, however painful it be, and learn to forgive and forget, it is essential to lay emphasis on the narratives of reconciliation over the narratives of conflict and hatred. By organizing seminars, workshops, public meetings, sports and cultural activities, the radical civil forums have to provide opportunities for positive and constructive interactions among the people belonging to different ethnic groups in the region. The labouring masses belonging to different ethnic communities must be educated, organized and involved in the united mass movements for finding solutions to the common problems of poverty, scarcity of land, unemployment, underdevelopment and absence of alternative sources of livelihood, for it is in such mass struggles that the people come to know one another, realize who are their friends and enemies are, give up their ethnic prejudices and learn to cooperate with one another to realize their common destinies.

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